



U.S. Immigration
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News Release

44 INDICTED IN LANDMARK MARRIAGE FRAUD INVESTIGATION

Probe targets Orange County network that arranged sham marriages primarily for Asian aliens

SANTA ANA, Calif. – A total of 44 individuals, many of them based in Orange County’s Little Saigon, have been indicted for their roles in an elaborate scheme to obtain fraudulent immigrant visas for hundreds of Chinese and Vietnamese nationals based on sham marriages to U.S. citizens.

The 13 separate indictments stem from a three-year, multi-agency investigation known as Operation “Newlywed Game.” The probe, led by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), is believed to be one of the largest marriage fraud investigations ever undertaken in the United States. ICE received substantial assistance in the case from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Orange County District Attorney’s Office, and the U.S. State Department’s Diplomatic Security Service.

Based on sealed indictments, ICE agents, accompanied by personnel from the Diplomatic Security Service, executed arrest warrants and conducted searches at 11 locations in Southern California and two sites in northern California yesterday. Among the locations searched was a Westminster residence where agents located the records of a now defunct travel agency, MT Travel, that investigators suspect was being used as a front to facilitate marriage fraud.

During the operation, 11 of the defendants were taken into custody. Most of the remaining suspects were either already under arrest on other charges, or will be summoned to appear in federal court for arraignment. (See accompanying list, page 3.)

The suspects in the case face a variety of federal charges, including conspiracy, fraud and misuse of visas, making false statements in passport applications, marriage fraud, and inducing aliens to enter the country illegally. Nine of the suspects who were arrested yesterday made their initial appearance in federal court in Santa Ana Tuesday afternoon. Two others appeared in federal court in San Francisco.

According to the indictments, the marriage fraud scheme involved a loose-knit network of “facilitators,” “recruiters,” and “petitioners.” At the heart of the conspiracy were the facilitators, who charged up to \$60,000 to orchestrate sham marriages for foreign nationals with U.S. citizens for the purpose of submitting fraudulent immigrant visa petitions on behalf of the aliens.

The facilitators often used recruiters, who typically received \$1,000 for each referral, to identify U.S. citizens willing to marry the aliens and submit the immigration visa petitions to USCIS. The U.S. citizen petitioners were paid thousands of dollars, plus travel expenses.

Since the foreign nationals often resided in Vietnam or China, the facilitators would then make arrangements for the U.S. citizen petitioners to go overseas to marry the aliens. After the sham marriage, the facilitators assisted the petitioners and aliens with filing bogus immigration petitions. The facilitators would also coach the petitioners and the aliens on what to say at subsequent adjustment of status interviews to persuade the USCIS officer that the couple had a legitimate marriage.

Because many of the facilitators used the same petitioners more than once, some of the U.S. citizens involved in the scheme had multiple “spouses” and submitted numerous fraudulent immigration petitions. Adjudicators at the USCIS California Service Center where the petitions are processed noticed the irregularities and alerted ICE agents, sparking the investigation. USCIS continued to support the investigation by referring scores of these cases through its newly established Fraud Detection and National Security (FDNS) program.

“Visa fraud undermines the integrity of our nation’s legal immigration system,” said Loraine Brown, special agent-in-charge for ICE investigations in Los Angeles. “These arrests should send a clear message that ICE is working aggressively to ensure that this kind of criminal activity does not go unchecked or unpunished.”

“You can expect an increasing number of immigration benefit fraud cases being detected as a result of USCIS and ICE's new joint anti-fraud strategy,” said Don Crocetti, Director of the FDNS for USCIS.

As part of Operation “Newlywed Game,” investigators reviewed scores of immigration files, as well as employment and travel histories to determine each defendant’s role. According to investigators, the suspects went to elaborate lengths to make the sham marriages appear legitimate, posing for wedding pictures, fabricating love letters, even creating fraudulent joint tax returns.

“The scope of this case clearly illustrates that the combined efforts of law enforcement agencies are yielding enhanced security of our borders by protecting the integrity of U.S. passports,” said Joe Morton, Director of the Diplomatic Security Service.

In addition to prosecuting the perpetrators of the scam, authorities are seeking to identify foreign nationals who may have illegally received immigration benefits as a result. ICE agents say those cases will be reviewed on an individual basis for potential criminal prosecution and deportation.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of four integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.